Professor Battles Preconceived Notions About Jews and Race

By Erin McKigney August 7, 2007

‘Most people, if they meet a white Jewish person, don’t ask that person, ‘How are you a Jew?’” said Lewis Gordon, a professor of philosophy at Temple University. “Most African American Jews face that all the time.”

Gordon says he knows firsthand what it’s like “to have your legitimacy constantly challenged.” After all, he’s black and Jewish himself.

As founder of the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies, Gordon strives to increase the understanding of diverse Jewish communities by providing reliable information, and to raise the standard of scholarship in Afro-Jewish studies by bringing together those who do groundbreaking work in the field.

Founded in the fall of 2004, the center is located in Temple’s department of religion and Judaic studies on the university’s Philadelphia campus. The center does not focus exclusively on Afro-Jewish populations; Chinese, Latin American and other Jewish populations are included, in addition to Ashkenazim and Sephardim. The goal, Gordon says, is to focus on a wide variety of Jewish-identified communities and enable communities to learn from one another.

Rebecca Alpert, chair of the religion department, says her program is “in a growth period at this point.”

“The center is really a part of that, when you get to hire a senior scholar of Lewis’s stature,” she said.

With the creation of a more intellectual climate on the subject, students and faculty are now able to delve into deeper discussion on campus. Future projects at Temple include a new course on Rastafarian Judaism, a course to introduce students to the diversity of Jewish communities and an introductory general education course on Jews and race. Next year, the center will organize a one-day symposium on race and Judaism, featuring authors Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Henry Goldschmidt. There also will be a small demographic study to gather accurate information on the black Jewish population in the Philadelphia area.

“What we have decided to do is proceed slowly, and part of that is because in many ways, we are responding to mistakes people made in the past when they were too zealous or quick with their research,” Gordon said. While he has been at Temple only since 2004, he is deeply involved in exposing information that the academic community knows little about. He is currently working on journal articles and on a short theoretical work introducing the problems of Afro-Jewish studies.

Gordon, whose mother is a Jamaican Jew and whose maternal grandfather’s family left Jerusalem in the 19th century, did not grow up religious. With his commitment to study Jewish and Semitic communities, however, he became more involved in religious life and is raising his children Jewish.

Throughout his career, Gordon noticed that when he presented himself as a “black Jew,” he was often met with shock and disbelief. According to Gordon, people’s ideas about Jews are skewed and there are things about Jewish communities that even fellow Jews don’t understand.

“You imagine Jews are people who came from Europe, and that is absurd,” he said. “It’s just not correct.”

Gordon said that the term “black Jew” is something “externally imposed upon Jewish communities.” Using the term, he said, causes racial separation within a group whose members refer to themselves at Hebrews, Israelites, Semites — or mostly Jews.

“When you simply say ‘Jew,’ it means ‘white Jew,’ and that is not accurate, because Jews were not white in the past, even among those from Europe,” Gordon said. “They had to become white, and it took a process for that to happen in the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe.”

According to Gordon, the ideal would be when one says the term Jew, “what one means is a mixed multiracial ethnic community of people — period.”

The constant questioning of history and origin, Gordon said, is one of the more complicated issues that Afro-Jews must face. According to Gordon, “Many people who look at Africa don’t look at Africa in a way that makes sense.” While most people look at Africa as a vast land of jungles and deserts, he said, the continent should also be looked at as a large network of ancient trade routes were Hebrew traders once settled.

Laura Levitt, director of Jewish studies at Temple, said the center’s work has

caused excitement and has created many possibilities for the future of Jewish studies, as well as race and ethnicity studies, on a campus that prides itself on diversity.

“We have had an important commitment to Jewish studies for a number of years, and the department is really interested in the study of race and ethnicity,” Levitt said. “The [Afro-Jewish] Center combines those two inputs in a significant way, allowing us to move into a really cutting-edge area of research.”

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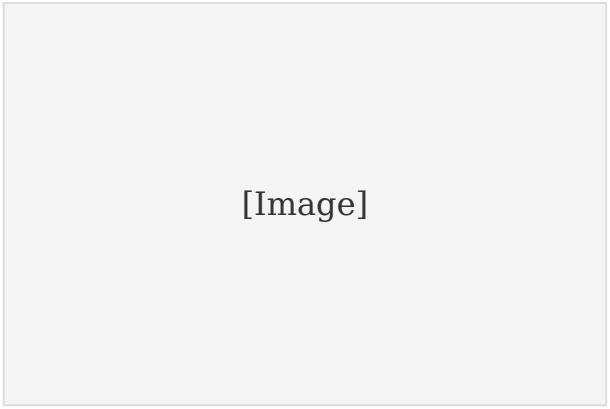

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